“This Preposterous Masculine Fiction”: Virginia Woolf and the Intellectual History of the Great War

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The standard presentation in survey anthologies of Virginia Woolf's significance remains that of stylist, modernist, and aesthete, an erudite but completely apolitical member of the Bloomsbury coterie. Woolf's legacy in twentieth century European intellectual history is secured, according to the evidence cited by Paul Fussell, by the fact that she reviewed Siegfried Sassoon's poems favorably and went skinny dipping with Rupert Brooke.1 Fussell declares that Woolf was “not involved with the war” and cites Jacob's Room as her only contribution to the 'literary war.'2 In fact, Fussell cites this novel only as an example of the theatrical metaphors for the Great War that had become clichéd “by the late thirties,” despite the fact that Jacob's Room was published in 1922.3

Virginia Woolf was in fact profoundly affected by the First World War, and was arguably the most consistent opponent of war in intellectual and literary England between the wars. Woolf was 32 years old when the Great War began, and for her it lasted until her death at the age of 59. War and militarism were dominant and recurrent themes in both her fiction and prose, from the 1922 publication of Jacob's Room, one of the earliest treatments of the Great War in fiction, to her final novel, Between the Acts, which she was revising at the time of her death in 1941. Woolf wrote and published extensively during the interwar period. A careful examination of her work demonstrates that Woolf wrestled with the “European War” and developed a sophisticated analysis of opposition to it.

Sifting through her work after World War I, it is difficult to find an area of Woolf's life or work that was not touched by the war. In truth, all of Woolf's writing was in response to it, either directly or indirectly, and Woolf's response to the war was feminist and political as well as aesthetic. Woolf wrote eight novels and six books of nonfiction, along with numerous articles, essays, and reviews during her life after the Great War. Woolf was a prolific correspondent, and 3,800 of her letters have survived, along with thirty notebooks of her daily journals from 1915 through 1941. Posthumous collections of Woolf's previously unpublished writings number approximately 40 volumes. In spite of this body of work precipitated by the Great War, there developed a myth that Woolf's interest in the war was 'negligible' and that she was largely untouched by it. Early critics of Woolf's work overlooked her critical analysis of the First World War, focusing on her stream-of-consciousness techniques to the exclusion of content. The diminution of Woolf's role in postwar cultural and intellectual history began with her

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2 Ibid., 314.
3 Ibid., 230.
contemporary literary critics, primarily male colleagues, whose assessments of her work and ideology are not borne out by her novels, essays, letters, and diaries.

This distorted view of Virginia Woolf's significance in intellectual history has persisted to the present, in part because primary evidence of Virginia Woolf's life and work was controlled for over half a century by male survivors who were not entirely receptive to her views on war and gender. Leonard Woolf described Virginia as "the least political animal... since Aristotle invented the definition."4 Leonard managed Virginia's literary estate for the 28 years that he outlived her. After Leonard's death in 1969, Virginia's nephew, Quentin Bell, assumed control of her estate until his death in 1997 at the age of 87. He declared in his biography of Woolf, "her prose could never be an effective vehicle for conveying political ideas."5

In spite of feminist and historical reinterpretations of her work, the editors and executors of Woolf's literary estate have controlled access to her papers and managed their presentation in a manner that has perpetuated the apolitical myth. For example, omitting all references to 'war' in an index, as Anne Olivier Bell has done in the five volumes of Woolf's published diaries, has a profoundly distorting effect on the perception of Woolf by the reader.6 Quentin Bell's 1972 biography of Woolf remained the only authoritative version of her life for twenty-five years, largely because of his control over Woolf's unpublished writings. Historians have generally followed the lead of literary critics, as with James Joll, who has written that "The novels of Virginia Woolf... conveyed no public message."7 A careful reading of Virginia Woolf's writings reveals a much more extensive engagement on her part with the Great War than most critics, historians, editors, and executors have allowed.

Woolf was an early and consistent critic of the war, and often lamented the effects of the war in journal entries: "Patriotism is a base emotion"(1915);8 "It is difficult to see how even a jingo can now believe in any good from war"(1918);9 "Patriotism is the devil"(1935).10 In a letter to Margaret Llewelyn Davies from 23 January, 1916, Woolf wrote: "I become steadily more feminist, owing to the Times, which I read at breakfast and wonder how this preposterous masculine fiction keeps going a day longer."11

In addition to her horror at the loss of life, Woolf was alarmed by the mob mentality that the war fostered. In a 1915 letter to Duncan Grant, she lamented its effect: "Now that they have been roused they seem full of the most violent and filthy passions."12 Woolf's reaction to the Armistice day crowds in London indicates that her worst fears had been confirmed:

8 Woolf, Diary, (vol. 1), 5.
9 ibid., 17.
10 Wolf, Diary (vol. 4), 291.
12 ibid., 71.
Every wounded soldier was kissed, by women; nobody had any notion where to
go or what to do; it poured steadily; crowds drifted up and down the pavements
waving flags and jumping into omnibuses, but in such a disorganised, half
heated, sordid state that I felt more and more melancholy and hopeless of the
human race... [They] make one doubt whether any decent life will ever be
possible, or whether it matters if we're at war or at peace. 13

In Woolf's view, war mobilization had subsumed the individual and left only a
monolithic, collective 'we.' In A Room of One's Own, she observed that "great bodies of
people are never responsible for what they do. They are driven by instincts which are not
within their control to make frontiers and flags; battleships and poison gas; to offer up
their own lives and their children's lives." 14 Woolf saw this loss of personal identity to
the forced, anonymous unity that war demanded as a continuing feature of inter-war life
and a contributing factor to fascism.

In the remarkable 1919 essay "The War from the Street," Woolf took on the topic
of subjectivity and cultural claims to the war experience. Woolf begins by declaring "the
history of the war is not and never will be written from our point of view." 15 This
review in the Times Literary Supplement of a book entitled Our Own History of the War,
which contains only one brief citation from the reviewed work, reads instead like a
discourse on the Great War itself:

Living through four years almost entirely composed of what journalists call
'historic days'... No one who has taken stock of his own impressions since 4
August 1914, can possibly believe that history as it is written closely resembles
history as it is lived... the generals, the statesmen, the people with names,
proclaim war... The individuals do the thing, and you in a muddled way reflect
what they do in blurred pictures half obliterating each other... But to have
opinions is not your business; for four years and more you are nothing but a vast
receptacle for the rumours of other people's opinions and deeds... Your conviction
that nothing is ever going to touch you is profound; it is obviously not in the
nature of things that you should be touched... But by this time we are analysing
you with admiration, and therefore you are not us; and therefore the history, is, as
it is always fated to be, your history, not ours. 16

The review contains an implicit critique of gender divisions, of public and private life,
social versus political history, and the hierarchical nature of state-sanctioned killing. It
also anticipates the concept of an "Outsiders Society" that Woolf would articulate in
Three Guineas nearly twenty years later.

Woolf consistently expressed the view in her diaries and letters that the Great
War was being romanticized. She felt that even writers like Vera Brittain had contributed

13 Ibid., 292.
15 Virginia Woolf, The Essays of Virginia Woolf (vol. 3), ed. Andrew McNeillie (London: Hogarth Press,
16 Ibid., 3-4.
inadvertently to glorification of the war, as all works in the trope of ‘anthems for doomed youth’ inevitably do. Woolf admitted grudging admiration for Brittain’s “social conscience,” but questioned her motives in publishing Testament of Youth, along with those of the other writers who made up the wave of belated war books that she was reading in 1933: “Why now? What urgency is there on them to stand bare in public? She feels that these facts must be made known, in order to help—what? herself partly I suppose.”

Woolf was distressed that ‘soldier-poets’ were increasingly glorified in overly-sentimental reviews and biographies that celebrated their struggles without a sense of disgust and outrage at the slaughter. In a 1917 review in the Times Literary Supplement entitled “A Cambridge V.A.D.” Woolf reminds readers that “a time in the trenches does not make bad men good.”18 In her 1918 review of Siegfried Sassoon, “Two Soldier-Poets,” Woolf cited the impossibility of judging dispassionately “poems written by young men who have fought or are still fighting.”19 In Mrs. Dalloway, the narrator describes “The European War” as “that little shindy of schoolboys with gunpowder.”20

Woolf again expressed her reservations regarding the ‘literary war’ in her review of The Collected Poems of Rupert Brooke: With a Memoir, which appeared in 1918. Woolf had known Brooke well in his “decadent Cambridge phase” and Woolf shared the sentiment amongst Brooke’s closest friends that the biography was distorted - “a disgraceful, sloppy, sentimental, rhapsody, leaving Rupert rather tarnished & yet canonised.”21 In preparing to write her review, she noted in her diary the conflict between honoring the war dead without honoring the war itself or glossing over the lives lost. “He was jealous, moody, ill-balanced, all of which I knew, but can hardly say in writing,”22 Woolf wrote of Brooke in her diary on 27 July 1918.

In her review, Woolf chose her words carefully, noting that because of the growth of “the Rupert Brooke legend” readers were left with a sadly “incomplete version which must in future represent Rupert Brooke to those who never knew him.”23 She protested the popular worship at his grave on the Greek island of Skyros and the shrine mentality: “To imagine him entombed, however nobly and fitly, apart from our interests and passions still seems impossibly incongruous with what we remember of . . . his life,” which was “complex & sceptical. . . Not with a sense of completeness, finality, but rather to wonder and to question still: what would he have been, what would he have done?”24 For Woolf, a detached, disjointed mentality in European culture persisted long after the war and represented another aspect of the ways in which the Great War continued to assault civilization.

17 Woolf, Diary (vol. 4), 177.
19 Ibid., 269.
20 Virginia Woolf, Mrs. Dalloway (New York: HBJ, 1925), 145.
22 Ibid., 172.
23 Wolf, Essays (vol. 2), 278.
24 Ibid., 281-82.
Woolf’s complete opposition to a cult of war heroes is clearly established in *Jacob’s Room*, where she focused on the civilian costs and social identities of the dead in a psychological study of the costs of the Great War. Woolf was already taking a revisionist view of the war, prior to 1922. Although there is nothing grand in Jacob’s death, a pointless sacrifice, neither is he eulogized: “Jacob’s Room is a covert critique of the romantic posturing so common in the anthems for doomed youth.”

He is evoked in the memories of those who knew him well and who recall for the reader examples of his privileges and prejudices, as well as his potential. *Jacob’s Room* addresses the war directly only twice, in brief passages. The exact manner of Jacob’s death, although never specified, is implied through a battle scene:

At a given signal all the guns are trained on a target which (the master gunner counts the seconds, watch in hand--at the sixth he looks up) flames into splinters. With equal nonchalance a dozen young men in the prime of life descend with composed faces into the depths of the sea; and there impassively (though with perfect mastery of machinery) suffocate uncomplainingly together.

Instead of dwelling on second-hand details of trench life and warfare, Woolf focuses on the life of a dead soldier from his bereaved mother’s point of view. Woolf makes references to domestic political events - such as the Irish Home Rule Bill and the restructuring of the House of Lords - that place Jacob’s time of death in the context of the home front. Although most references in the novel to death are oblique, Jacob’s surname, “Flanders”, would have been synonymous with death for the contemporary reader, since nearly one-third of the one million British soldiers killed in World War I died there.

Despite its pedestrian view of the war, *Jacob’s Room* was inaccessible for many contemporary readers because it appeared fragmented and lacked a tidy conclusion. This was, however, a function of the very idea that Woolf was trying to convey: the sense of a truncated life. Woolf’s development of the stream-of-consciousness style was an effort to employ a form of writing that would convey her themes through form and structure as well as content.

Although Woolf did not directly experience combat, she did possess insider knowledge of the political prosecution of the war. Her friend John Maynard Keynes, who remained at the Treasury during the war, gave her an intimate account of Asquith’s resignation as Prime Minister in December 1916, his succession by Lloyd George, and President Wilson’s private threats to cut off aid to Great Britain. On October 15, 1918, her cousin, H.A.L. Fisher, a cabinet member in Lloyd George’s coalition government from 1916 to 1922, dropped by for tea and told her “We’ve won the war today... we shall have peace by Christmas.” Woolf recorded the experience in her diary: “extraordinary... to be in touch with one who was in the very centre of the very centre, sitting in a little room at Downing St. where the fate of armies does more or less hang upon what two or

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27 ibid., 64-65.
three elderly gentlemen decide.”29 This perspective on power is reflected in a strikingly similar passage in Jacob’s Room: “Gentlemen, lifting their pens or turning perhaps rather wearily in their chairs, decreed that the course of history should shape itself this way or that way.”30 This dual consciousness as insider/outsider is a recurring theme in Woolf’s writings, and especially her prose.

Woolf’s next novel, Mrs. Dalloway (1925), is considered by some the finest novel of the Great War. In it, Woolf attacks the official version of the war. The novel includes among its themes deferred shell-shock, the marginalization of veterans, the subjective nature of sanity, and the postwar sufferings of survivors. In a series of jarring comparisons, Woolf juxtaposes a lower-middle class veteran, Septimus Smith, with the comfortable insularity of the governing class. Septimus sits in the park listening to the voices that inspire him to write a treatise against the evils of war while the upper class welcomes the reappearance of quality leather goods in the shops on Bond Street; the crowd follows a limousine in hopes of catching a glimpse of the Queen and aeroplanes have been redeployed, skywriting advertisements over London while children on the street stare at the disabled veteran. Woolf has the narrator sum up this malaise with a flippant but insightful “Poor women, nice little children, orphans, widows, the War--tut, tut.”31

Woolf suggests throughout the novel that a stoic ruling class is denying the costs of the war, engaging in a conspiracy to deny its significance and its pain, refusing to respond to the transformation. “Every one has friends who were killed in the War,”32 one character observes, but the social system continues status quo anté because it simply ignores the devastation.

Woolf’s social agenda in this novel echoes a statement in her diary from 1920: “Our generation is daily scourged by the bloody war.”33 The timeless nature of the fallout from the war is a major theme throughout Woolf’s novels and essays. Her development of the stream of consciousness model can be viewed as an effort to transcend the temporal limits of traditional political history, with its discrete markers of peacetime and civilian life.

In A Room of One’s Own (1929), Woolf explored the gender divisions that the war had produced:

Shall we lay the blame on the war? When the guns fired in August 1914, did the faces of men and women show so plain in each other’s eyes that romance was killed? Certainly it was a shock (to women in particular with their illusions about education, and so on) to see the faces of our rulers in the light of the shell-fire. So ugly they looked—German, English, French—so stupid.34

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29 Woolf, Diary (vol. 1), 204.
30 Woolf, Jacob’s Room , 172.
31 Virginia Woolf, Mrs. Dalloway (New York: HBJ, 1925), 28.
32 ibid., 99.
33 Woolf, Diary (vol. 2), 51.
34 Woolf, A Room of One’s Own , 15.
Woolf goes on to analyze the dilemma for women, who are caught between two seemingly irreconcilable facts: The attractiveness of the idea that “a great mind is androgynous,”\(^{35}\) combined with the fact that “England is under the rule of a patriarchy.”\(^{36}\) As a feminist and a pacifist, Woolf recognized the risk involved in her analysis:

![Image](https://via.placeholder.com/150)

It is fatal for a woman to lay the least stress on any grievance; to plead even with justice any cause; in any way to speak consciously as a woman. And fatal is no figure of speech; for anything written with that conscious bias is doomed to death... Brilliant and effective, powerful and masterly, as it may appear for a day or two, it must wither at nightfall.\(^{37}\)

This passage anticipates precisely the fate of *Three Guineas*, a ‘powerful and masterly’ grievance against ‘European war,’ written with gender consciousness.

From her early treatments of the gendered effects of the Great War, Woolf moved steadily toward an analysis of war that located gender as a cause rather than an outcome. This perspective appears to have been influenced by the ways that gender divisions were highlighted and exacerbated by World War I. Woolf indicts patriarchal society in *Three Guineas*, with the argument that “final proof of its harshness upon one sex... can be found in the annals of our ‘great war,’ when hospitals, harvest fields and munition works were largely staffed by refugees flying from its horrors to their comparative amenity.”\(^{38}\) Woolf suggests a complimentary argument in her critique of women’s gender socialization, which she saw as ensuring their support for the war:

How else can we explain that amazing outburst in August 1914, when the daughters... who had been educated thus rushed into hospitals, some still attended by their maids, drove lorries, worked in fields and munition factories, and used all their immense stores of charm, of sympathy, to persuade young men that to fight was heroic, and that the wounded in battle deserved all her care and all her praise? Thus consciously she desired ‘our splendid Empire’; unconsciously she desired our splendid war.\(^{39}\)

Woolf’s thesis explains her contempt for the suffragists who had turned militantly patriotic during the war, and her skepticism toward women like Vera Brittain for playing the role of help-mate to warriors in an epic tragedy. Woolf was well aware that many of the militant ‘suffragettes’ had defected from peace movement to support the war in a quid pro quo strategy to gain the vote.\(^{40}\) Woolf urged women to “refuse in the event of war to make munitions or nurse the wounded,”\(^{41}\) and suggests somewhat sarcastically that

\(^{35}\) Ibid., 102.

\(^{36}\) Ibid., 33.

\(^{37}\) Ibid., 108.


\(^{39}\) Ibid., 57-58.

\(^{40}\) Zwerdling, *Virginia Woolf and the Real World*, 237.

\(^{41}\) Wolf, *Three Guineas*, 162.
women make “a courageous and effective experiment in the prevention of war by not knitting socks.”

Woolf’s ideology of pacifism has been described as “virtually unprecedented” because of her unique synthesis of pacifism and feminism. Although Vera Brittain maintained her post-war pacifism throughout World War II, she had come to it late, in Woolf’s opinion, and at times fell victim to the heroic vision of the war, which Brittain admitted:

   It is, I think, this glamour, this magic, this incomparable keying up of the spirit in a time of mortal conflict, which constitute the pacifist’s real problem—a problem still incompletely imagined, and still quite unsolved... the challenge to spiritual endurance, the intense sharpening of all the senses, the vitalising consciousness of common peril for a common end... no emotion known to man seems as yet to have quite the compelling power of this enlarged vitality.

In writing her 1933 “epic of the women who went to war,” Brittain employed the ultimate device for telling a war story in all of its heroic connotations, and in it she declares that “war, while it lasts, does produce heroism to a far greater extent than it brutalises.” Woolf was determined to undermine such notions of false heroism.

Woolf was painfully aware of the susceptibility to epic heroism of the younger generation, as exemplified by her nephew, Julian Bell. Bell, her sister Vanessa’s eldest son, had been raised in a community vehemently opposed to war, and he had collected essays and memoirs from World War I conscientious objectors for a 1935 anthology, We Did Not Fight: 1914-1918 Experiences of War Resisters. With the rise of fascism, however, he rejected pacifism and felt compelled to participate in the Spanish Civil War, informing his elders that he was fighting for the same causes that inspired them not to fight in the Great War.

On April 28, 1935, Woolf recounted in her diary a discussion with Julian that foreshadowed her arguments in Three Guineas regarding war and “whether one can give people a substitute for war.” Julian had argued that men “must have the danger emotion,” and that “all the young men are communists in order to gratify their desire to do things together & in order to have some danger.” After recording their point/counterpoint, Woolf noted: “But this was not the 1914 emotion. Lust & danger. Cant [sic] cut them out at once. Must divert them on to some harmless object. But what? Some fantasy must be provided. I say many people have found life exciting without war and bull fighting. Has war ever won any cause?”

Woolf viewed Julian Bell’s death, in July 1937, not only as a personal tragedy but also as another sign of the increasing polarization of the interwar years, and of a backlash

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42 Ibid., 177.
43 Zwerdling, Virginia Woolf and the Real World, 299.
45 Ibid., 77.
46 Ibid., 370.
48 Woolf, Diary (vol. 4), 307.
against pacifism. In a letter to her sister, written the same day as the diary entry above, Woolf noted the discussion with Julian -- "we got into a political argument which lasted all night" -- along with Virginia's growing awareness and alarm regarding German anti-Semitism.\(^{49}\) In an unpublished memoir of Julian written immediately after his death, Woolf asked herself:

> What did he feel about Spain? What made him feel it necessary, knowing as he did how it must torture Nessa, to go? He knew her feeling... He knew that: & yet deliberately inflicted this fearful anxiety on her. What made him do it: I suppose its a fever in the blood of the younger generation which we can't possibly understand. I have never known any one of my generation have that feeling about a war. We were all C.O.'s in the Great war. And though I understand that this is a 'cause', can be called the cause of liberty & so on, still my natural reaction is to fight intellectually: if I were any use, I should write against it: I should evolve some plan for fighting English tyranny. The moment force is used, it becomes meaningless & unreal to me.\(^{50}\)

Developing a "plan for fighting English tyranny" was exactly the project that she undertook next.

Woolf began collecting articles from the daily newspapers and organizing them into the reading notebooks for *Three Guineas* (1938). These then became the source material for the damaging quotes and extensive footnotes that supplied evidence for the link between 'masculinity' and war that Woolf was exploring. Woolf had been examining gendered aspects of the war from its beginning, but in *Three Guineas*, which she referred to in December 1935 as "my war book,"\(^{51}\) her political philosophy is the most complete and complex. The book is Woolf's attempt to articulate a unified intellectual position that would be inclusive of the opposition, feminists, socialists, pacifists, anti-fascists, artists, Jews, in a united front against the patriarchy.

The heart of her thesis in *Three Guineas* is that there is a direct connection between the tyranny of the patriarchal family and the tyranny of fascism. Woolf was ideally positioned to assess the effects of the Great War, because she had emerged from the late Victorian era and experienced both sides of the great divide that World War I represented in European intellectual history. Woolf saw a direct connection between the mentality of the Victorian patriarch and that of the modern fascist; both were examples of "the hypnotic power of dominance" that gender socialization offers to men.\(^{52}\) Woolf juxtaposed statements by Hitler and Mussolini regarding women's acceptable roles and the increasing gender segregation in those societies with remarkably similar quotes by prominent and distinguished British men. For the reader, the spectacle of finding interchangeable sentiments expressed by the Church of England and Mussolini, by the War Office and Hitler, allowed Woolf to establish the connection between all-male institutions and dictatorships without overtly arguing that they were kindred spirits.


\(^{50}\) Bell, *Biography*, 258-59.

\(^{51}\) Woolf, *Diary* (vol. 4), 360.

\(^{52}\) Woolf, *Three Guineas*, 228.
Woolf begins her treatise against war with the observation that “Scarcely a human being in the course of history has fallen to a woman’s rifle... Obviously there is for you some glory, some necessity, some satisfaction in fighting which we have never felt or enjoyed.” The book proceeds with the unfolding of the direct linkages that Woolf saw between gender and war. She observes that when suffragettes began to use force, the state “sent her to prison, and would very likely still keep her there, had it not been, paradoxically enough, that the help she gave her brothers when they used force at last gave her the right to call herself, if not a full daughter, still a step-daughter of England.”

Clearly, by 1938 Virginia Woolf had given up on the idea of the “androgyrous mind” that she had proposed in A Room of One’s Own.

Woolf’s 1929 warning from A Room of One’s Own, “Great bodies of people are never responsible for what they do”, anticipated precisely the danger that fascism presented, and also exposed the subterfuge that liberal democracy afforded to patriarchs. Three Guineas was a further attempt to convince an audience of liberal educated men of the wisdom in an alliance with women in a united front against misogyny, fascism, and war. Woolf methodically traced the connections between the tyranny of the patriarchal family and the tyranny of European dictators and presented the two as points on a continuum, microcosm and macrocosm, of the same dynamic.

Virginia Woolf grew increasingly pessimistic and intellectually isolated during the late 1930s. It is clear from her diaries and correspondence that she followed Hitler’s rise to power and listened to his speeches on the newly established BBC. Woolf must have been familiar also with Mussolini’s ideology, since Hogarth had published his The Political and Social Doctrine of Fascism in 1933. Woolf’s theories regarding war and gender were confirmed by her close observation of the rise of fascism, but her absolute opposition to war and her attention to gender were not shared by her peers. Woolf read Freud late in her life (1939), after Hogarth had published the first English editions of his works. While she agreed with much of Civilization and Its Discontents (1929) regarding social repression and aggression, Woolf believed that war was a specifically masculine rather than a broadly human impulse. Woolf had always been outside of the mainstream, but now even within the intellectual minority of Bloomsbury she found herself a minority of one.

Maynard Keynes declared the war resistance movement a failure in 1938 and deserted it, as did Leonard, who joined the Home Guard. Men like Sassoon were ambivalent in their condemnations of war, as he had later recanted and declared himself cured “of my pacifist errors.” David Garnett, Duncan Grant, Clive Bell, Aldous Huxley, E.M. Forster, and Bertrand Russell were all Conscientious Objectors in the Great War, but all supported the new war.

Woolf was also chastised by her beloved Vita Sackville-West, who was busy assuring her aristocratic friends that Woolf was much too smart to be a feminist. Sackville-West also challenged Woolf for her synthesis of feminism and pacifism and

53 Ibid., 8-9.
54 Ibid., 20.
55 Woolf, A Room of One’s Own, 38.
56 Zwerdling, Virginia Woolf and the Real World, 294.
57 Ibid., 288.
suggested women's complicity in war: "Is it not true that many women are extremely bellicose and urge their men to fight? What about the white feather campaign in the last war?" Woolf noted in her diary that because feminists found Hitler and fascism irresistible enemies, it was increasingly apparent to her that feminist pacifism could not compete with militant anti-fascism.

The stark simplicity of Woolf's argument in *Three Guineas* provoked an underwhelming critical response upon publication. Woolf criticized sex-role socialization and masculinity, not men in themselves, but the distinctions that Woolf makes were overlooked by most. As one critic has remarked, "the truths in *Three Guineas* belonged to an order of speech that was inadmissible at the time." Even at a distance of nearly sixty years, literary critics sometimes still feel the need to inform readers that Woolf "comes too close to an attack on biological maleness itself," apparently too close for the comfort of the critic. This type of reaction illustrates precisely the risk that Woolf took in addressing essentialist gender arguments. Woolf was well aware of the risks that the book posed. While writing *Three Guineas*, she noted in her journal on 21 November, 1935: "After our dinner... with Aldous & the subconscious hostility I always feel there, I'm facing the fact that my next book... The Next War, will need some courage. 2 million women all longing for men, Aldous said. Raymond insisted, with his little hard squeak, that men were now unfairly treated: have to maintain a <woman> wife." In light of the response that she faced, it is questionable whether the book would have been published at all had it not been for the fact that Woolf was co-owner of a publishing house.

As *Three Guineas* was being reviewed in June of 1938, Woolf noted the reception in her diary: "many high compliments; some snarls... generally kind, rather surprise, & its over... No thanks: no enthusiasm from the young for whom I toiled. But thats as I expected..." It seems clear from the mixed and muted response to *Three Guineas*, and from her private memoir of Julian Bell, that although she was not entirely surprised by the apathy and ambivalence of "the young for whom I toiled," Virginia Woolf was saddened nonetheless.

The men of Bloomsbury rejected *Three Guineas* categorically. Virginia remarked in her diary "L. gravely approves" but Leonard described it after her death as her worst book, "oppressed by the weight of its facts and arguments." J.M. Keynes' response behind Virginia's back "was both angry and contemptuous; it was, he declared, a silly argument and not very well written." Although he thus ridiculed it to his friends, Woolf noted knowingly in her journal "he never said a word" to her about the book, which spoke

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58 Ibid., 300.
59 Woolf, *Diary* (vol. 4), 273.
61 Zwerdling, *Virginia Woolf and the Real World*, 263.
62 Woolf, *Diary* (vol. 4), 354.
63 Woolf, *Diary* (vol. 5), 149.
64 Ibid., 127.
66 Bell, *Biography*, 205.
volumes. Nephew Quentin Bell (Julian’s brother) was perhaps the most honest in his rejection of the book:

What really seemed wrong with the book.. was the attempt to involve a discussion of women’s rights with the far more agonising and immediate question of what we were to do in order to meet the ever-growing menace of Fascism and war. The connection between the two questions seemed tenuous and the positive suggestions wholly inadequate.

Bell went on to trivialize her position as that of “an out-and-out pacifist” although “she never made this clear in terms of policy,” since Woolf’s book was merely the “instinctive reaction of the feminine as opposed to the masculine - ‘the beastly masculine.’” In a biography written and released the year after her death, Woolf’s old friend E.M. Forster rejected Woolf’s philosophy with a metaphor of disease: “Her writing has spots of feminism all over it.” Apparently, Woolf’s opposition to war had fallen out of fashion, and her feminism had never been in favor.

Virginia Woolf’s analysis of the Great War, which she developed over nearly three decades, grew increasingly sophisticated, coherent and problematic. The paradox with Woolf is that her diagnosis of war is simultaneously too radical and yet too fundamental to attract serious consideration, as Roger Poole has noted:

Virginia Woolf in Three Guineas announces something that belongs to “the Obvious” and is immediately damped down into inaudibility and irreceivability by the discourse of power. Not only then, but now, for the stark literalness of the Woolfian doctrine subverts and “undoes” every literary-theoretical construct about “gender” since Lacan. But . . . [if] Virginia Woolf is the greatest novelist of war, in Three Guineas she may (yet) be discovered to be its greatest theoretician.

In this respect, Woolf’s treatise against war may fairly be compared to Septimus Smith’s, scratched out in Mrs. Dalloway while suffering from shell-shock:

The supreme secret must be told to the Cabinet; first that trees are alive; next there is no crime; next love, universal love, he muttered, gasping, trembling, painfully drawing out these profound truths which needed, so deep were they, so difficult, an immense effort to speak out, but the world was entirely changed by them for ever. No crime; love; he repeated, fumbling for his card and pencil.

The weary Great War veteran did not, of course, reach his audience. A mentally ill casualty, Septimus possessed no credibility. In fact, his horror of the war was viewed by

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67 Woolf, Diary (vol. 5), 163.
68 Bell, Biography, 205.
69 Ibid., 205.
71 Poole, “We All Put Up With You Virginia,” 99.
72 Woolf, Mrs. Dalloway, 102.
his doctors as proof of his mental illness, the very definition of it. In the “real world” of realpolitik, Woolf stood no more chance of affecting the Cabinet than did Septimus Smith.

Because Woolf, like Smith, committed suicide, her later essays were dismissed by some as the work of a woman on the verge of madness. Woolf’s philosophy receded into the background and her stature as an intellectual diminished. Rather than sharing her view of war as mental illness, Woolf’s critics have focused on her refusal to endure another ‘European War’ as proof of her madness. Even scholars like Elaine Showalter have focused more attention on Woolf’s menstrual cycle than on her intellectual achievements and her bold and visionary analysis of the roots of war. Showalter dismisses Three Guineas as “irritating and hysterical” and focuses instead on what she saw as Woolf’s real problem: “For a woman, and especially for a childless woman, menopause itself can be a kind of death.” It is ironic that the very psychoanalytic theory that she and Leonard first published has often been used to marginalize her as a writer and an intellectual, for as Freudian psychology gained cultural currency, Virginia Woolf’s stature as a philosopher was diminished.

Woolf’s early works were concerned with the gender differentiation that the war produced. Between 1914 and 1941, Woolf came to see war as a product of gender. She moved beyond what she believed was the false dichotomy of left versus right in European politics. She had declared herself a Fabian at a peace conference in January 1915, but came to reject the overly-simplistic dogma of economic determinism, in the belief that psychology was equally important. Woolf focused on the ways in which masculinist culture thrives on war and thus makes it inevitable. At the same time, she suggested throughout her work that men are also victims of their own fictions of superiority. Woolf believed in the human potential to transcend gender socialization -- “sexes can adapt themselves” -- but saw very little evidence of it. Virginia Woolf thus traveled full circle in her writing, arriving in her last works at an analysis of the “preposterous masculine fiction” of war as a dynamic relationship between the patriarchal family and the militarism of the nation-state, both of which offer “the hypnotic power of dominance” to men.

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74 Woolf, Diary (vol. 1), 26.
75 Woolf, Letters (vol 6), 379-80